

STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER JONATHAN S. ADELSTEIN

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Yesterday, I had an opportunity to witness first hand just some of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. It was devastation like nothing I have ever seen before, and hope never to see again. The horrifying images we have seen in the media over the past couple of weeks were no preparation. Seeing the destruction and personal loss up close, it is worse than I could have ever imagined. My heartfelt sympathies go out to those who have suffered through this unbelievable tragedy, and to the families and friends of those who were lost.

As a light to counter this darkness, we have also seen the resilience of the human spirit. I saw it yesterday in the eyes of hundreds of communications workers who are working around the clock to restore connectivity to the Gulf Coast. It was a privilege to spend even a few minutes with people who are working so hard to restore critical communications services, even though they themselves have suffered great personal loss. Their stories, and those we have heard today, reveal how we pull together as a people in the face of great adversity. So I want to join my colleagues in thanking those of you here, and the many others who did not have an opportunity to present before us today, as representatives of the thousands of your colleagues who are working tirelessly both in the field and at other critical locations around the region, like right here in Atlanta.

Enormous coordination was needed and performed under often chaotic circumstances. We all owe you, and so many others, a great deal of gratitude for your commitment to seeing that our critical communications infrastructures are fully restored as quickly as possible.

I would also like to thank Chairman Martin for his remarkable personal dedication to the Katrina response, working to ensure that the FCC is as responsive as possible in the wake of this tragedy. I would also like to thank Dan Gonzalez, who has worked many long hours on these issues over the past two weeks, and I have appreciated his efforts to keep me and the other Commissioners apprised as we have moved to respond. I know that the Chairman, Dan, and our Commission staff have worked hard and extremely quickly to respond in countless ways to help restore service, and I want to thank them for their efforts to assemble this informative fact-finding meeting.

Our panels today represent the breadth, depth and diversity of our country's communications network – from broadcast to satellite to public safety to wireless and wireline. We have seen how our communications workers give so much of themselves to make available the networks on which we all rely. This group demonstrates how critical it is that we all work closely together – the Commission included – in times of crisis.

I know that everyone has gone well beyond the call of duty in deploying emergency restoration systems in support of critical relief efforts. It is truly humbling to see Americans act so selflessly when others are in need, particularly when so many are themselves enduring the loss of homes, communities, and loved ones. I saw people at work yesterday at a call center who had no home where they could return. They told me the only normal thing in their lives was the workplace.

I have also been moved by the generosity of communications workers across the country, who have found countless ways to lend their support. These successful efforts to restore communications have enabled many of those hurt by this tragedy to reconnect with loved ones. It is difficult to overstate the value of communications systems for citizens desperate to find out what is happening, the status of their loved ones, and when help will be on the way. I applaud the many carriers who have put aside the bottom line to ensure that their customers have access to services, whether or not bills are being paid. To many, wireless phones, for example, may be one of the few possessions still retained by evacuees. Continued service is an important gesture that we hope can add some sense of stability to those who have suffered so much.

With Hurricane Katrina, we again see the importance of communications for first responders, public safety officials, local, state and federal officials, and for the many citizens affected by this disaster. Just yesterday, the members of the 9/11 Commission underscored the need to better prepare for just this sort of situation.

As many of you outlined, Katrina has served as a brutal reminder of the critical importance of having crisis management plans in place. As a nation, we can never let our guard down since we never know when the next disaster will strike.

Now is an important time for all of us to take heed and assess what went right but just as importantly, to figure out how we can improve our preparedness and response. Together, we must decide where a higher standard of emergency preparedness is necessary. We owe it to the American people to do even better.

Our panelists today have played an important role in starting to draw out those lessons. We heard time and again about the importance of access to power, fuel and generators. We also heard about the importance of security, so that communications workers can stay with, or return quickly to, facilities in jeopardy. Our panelists have reaffirmed the importance of redundancy and planning across the industry, and we have been reminded once again about the importance of sufficient, reliable, and interoperable public safety systems. But there is much more to be learned, more to be done, and a lot of hard questions yet to be asked.

So I applaud the Chairman's decision to appoint a blue-ribbon panel to look at the effects of Hurricane Katrina – how we prepared, how we responded, and what we can do to improve. I also commend his efforts to reorganize and refocus the FCC so that we can best address public safety, homeland security, and disaster preparedness issues. I know this is an issue that my colleague,

Commissioner Copps, has long championed, so I look forward to implementing this proposal with my colleagues. I also look forward to working with the Chairman and my colleagues on the additional policy efforts that he has proposed to target available resources, including universal service, to help the victims of this tragedy.

Finally, I would like to thank Ken Moran and the hundreds of FCC employees who have worked tirelessly over the past two weeks. They have done a remarkable job in making our agency as responsive as possible. We have heard a lot of well-deserved compliments for turning on a dime and making the best of a bad situation. As with many of the companies who have joined us today, we rise and fall with the dedication of our employees, and we have seen countless acts of dedication on their parts.

Now more than ever, we have all come to rely on our media for information in times of crisis and on help always being just a phone call away. It is a disaster such as this that reminds us how that assumption needs to always be true.

I thank you all again for your commitment and for your efforts to ensure that these communications lifelines are always available.